The Fourth Church Pulpit

LOVE'S ETERNITY

April 7, 1996

Easter Sunday

John M. Buchanan

Jesus had to be brought from the dead; not in order to get us into heaven (though one has no quarrel with that prospect, either) but to get us into life! To bring us fully to life, creaturely life, the life we spend our days and nights trying to escape from, avoid, reconstruct along ideal lines, control, transcend, manipulate, resign ourselves to. Jesus saves. He saves us for life, for giving ourselves over to its joys and sorrows, its predictable and unpredictable occurrences, its routines and its surprises. He saves us from the awful habit we have of saving ourselves, of sparing our energies, of protecting our minds and souls and bodies ... He saves us for the spend-thriftiness of love, of work, of play.

Douglas John Hall
Professing the Faith

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY
126 East Chestnut Street Chicago, Il 60611-2094
Phone: (312) 787-4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture
I Corinthians 15:51-58

John 20:1-10

"It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."
I Corinthians 13:7,8a (NRSV)

She came to the place where he was buried because she loved him, and love is always stronger than death.

Mary Magdalene is her name, and while there is a tradition that she had a mental illness, she was possessed by demons and was healed by Jesus, and that she may have been the prostitute who anointed his feet with oil, there is more recent scholarship that suggests that none of that is true, that she was a woman of some means, sophisticated, educated. She was certainly an integral part of the small group of apostles who lived with him and traveled with him. She is certainly among his closest and most intimate friends.

She has come to the garden tomb, it would appear, to say good bye to her friend, for private grieving, for closure, for the same reasons the human race has evolved customs such as wakes, funerals, visiting hours, memorials. She has to be there to close the door on what was a wonderful life changing period for her, a time of growth and a new way of thinking, a time of learning to care and forgive and accept and love. It must have been a self- disciplined, intentional confrontation with the reality of death. Jesus, her friend, her teacher, her mentor, her companion, was dead. It was time to close the book on this chapter and get on with her life.

One thing is very clear. She did not go to the garden tomb expecting a resurrection. She is admirably focused. She isn't hysterical at all. When she discovers that the tomb is empty she runs to the others to tell them. Peter and John investigate, note the fact that the body is gone and go back to the room where they were hiding. She continues her personal vigil.

Even two angels do not interrupt her focused purpose. This is a woman accustomed to getting things done. She is not about to be distracted. She treats the angels, someone noted, like orderlies, stripping the hospital bed. [Barbara Lundblad, *Journal for Preachers*, April, 1996]

And then she encounters a man she assumes is the gardener and again repeats her purpose — to find the body.

This is great writing, by the way. Reynolds Price calls it the best narrative writing in all of literature. It has to be an eye-witness account, he says. It's too good to be fiction. As you listened did you notice that the energy in this ancient account turns around, and suddenly the seeker is found, the one looking for a dead body is addressed, by her name. She recognizes him now: calls him "teacher, dear teacher," and she must have tried to embrace him because he orders her not to hold him but to go tell the others what she has seen.

How, one might ask, how in the world did we ever read that and conclude that it is inappropriate for women to be clergy? It seems pretty clear that if it weren't for an astute, focused, strong woman, the men might have missed the whole thing.

It's a good thing she went looking and stayed with it even when it became clear that she would not accomplish her original objective because the body was gone. I conclude that it is not altogether dissimilar from our experience this morning, and the experience of the millions of people all over the world, people in unprecedented numbers, people who don't bother with religion the rest of the year who are crowding into churches this morning and singing "Jesus Christ is Risen Today" and hearing this mysterious story again.

All three major national magazines had Jesus on the cover this week, *Time, Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report* ... unprecedented in what scholars sometimes call the "post-Christian era" and what we all know is our terribly secular society. Jesus is big, obviously. One of my colleagues — who was willing to share his insight with me because I get to preach the Easter sermon — came into my office with the three magazine covers and said, "He's bigger than Dennis Rodman. Do you think he'll make the Bigsby and Kruthers mural on the Kennedy?" There's room there now, I understand.

The articles, by the way, written to coincide with Easter, were reporting on the current popularity of Jesus scholarship. Professional biblical scholars are pursuing the "historical Jesus," bringing the tools of critical academic scholarship to the biblical accounts to try to isolate and identify what is factual and what we can actually know about Jesus. The goal is to try to identify the Jesus of history apart from the Christ of faith. That's not easy to do; some New Testament scholars say you can't do it, and the whole project bothers some people who believe the Bible should not be subjected to critical analysis. In addition, some of the scholars seem determined to be as controversially irreverent as possible.

But when it comes to the resurrection, almost all the scholars take a big step backward. There is no concrete evidence you can analyze. No one was there. No one saw it. The New Testament doesn't even try to describe it. The closest we have to hard copy is an empty tomb and that didn't prove a thing. The empty tomb didn't even suggest anything other than someone had moved the body.

But we do keep returning to the garden — like Mary — looking. The scholars keep inquiring. We come on Easter morning to have another look into the empty tomb. And we do it, literally by taking pilgrimages to the Holy Land to see where it happened, to pin it down in terms of time and space.

A preacher can't go to the Holy Land and not tell about it on Easter morning. This is my year — so bear with me while I tell you about fifty-five of us from Fourth Church who looked into the tomb last October. Both tombs, actually. For those who have the stamina and the admission fee, Jesus has two tombs in Jerusalem, an orthodox tomb and an evangelical Protestant tomb. At the Orthodox Church of the Holy Sepulcher there is a mob scene; tourist groups from many nations crowding, squeezing, pushing. Once again we have arrived at the end of a long hot day and must wait in line 30 minutes. And once again the Chicago men form a defensive curtain so we can all get into the tomb in front of the Germans. There are icons and murals and crosses and candles in glass containers hanging from the ceiling adorning every available spot. Through a tight door there is a tiny shelf carved into the rock, more candles and murals. You can look for maybe five seconds. "That's the spot," we are told by the guide.

But it turns out there's a garden tomb as well. And so we get back on the bus in the late afternoon and are greeted at the garden by a cheerful British Baptist, Rev. Reggie, who smilingly delivers his well rehearsed homily which somehow not only tells the story but turns a theological corner and lets any non-Christian present know that unless they believe this story the way Reggie is telling it, their immortal souls are in a lot of trouble — ultimately. We stand in line again and see another hole in the rock and it seems slightly more plausible, a little less like an amusement park.

It was afterward, in a quiet corner of the garden, when we celebrated communion, and received bread and wine from the olive wood communion cups the British Baptists provide for the price of admission ... it was after we had tried to confirm or understand or at least experience the plausibility of the resurrection that its reality emerged for me, at least. It was as Dave Donovan said the words, "This is my body — broken for you" and served me the bread that something of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the power and immediacy of faith, not in an event that happened 2,000 years ago, but in a risen Lord whose power and love are present realities, came into focus.

I loved reading what one of the ancient theologians of the Church said, Ignatius of Antioch, about a century after the fact. "Jesus rose into the silence of God."

It isn't about an empty tomb. A cemetery. It isn't about the biological probabilities and improbabilities. Mary tries to be rational about this as long as she can. She wants to hold him to assure herself, I think, that what she thinks she sees is actually there. "Don't hold me," he says. this is not about a resuscitated body. This is about a power that conquers death. This is about the vindication of the life of love and compassion and self-sacrifice.

This is about the final triumph of that foolish love St. Paul described: love become vulnerable, love willing to suffer and die. This is God's "yes" to love — a yes that will not be drowned out by the world's no, the world's tragedy, the world's hatred and injustice, the world's suffering.

The point is not academic, scientific, nor is it an intellectual abstraction. The meaning of Easter addresses us, someone noted, at the point of our deepest pain and most profound grief. The risen Christ calls Mary by name precisely as she is grieving his death. And so this comes at us — comes to us, mostly I believe, not as an academic proposition, but as we ponder the reality of human mortality, the mystery of human death and the almost indescribable pain of grief.

One of my favorite books is *Children's Letters to God.* It is full of the honest and simple faith of children ...

> "Dear God:
> Thank you for the baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy.
> Joyce"

One of my favorites is:

> "God, I would like to live 900 years like the guy in the Bible.
> Love, Chris"

And my current favorite, for Easter, is:

> "Dear God, Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones why don't you just keep the ones you got now?
> Jane"

The distinguished Catholic theologian Karl Rahner called death "the absurd arch-contradiction of existence," which is an elegant way of saying, "why don't you just keep the ones you got?"

What makes death intolerable, ultimately unthinkable for a child, is love. It's a lesson we might learn. Henri Nouwen, Dutch theologian, wrote a wonderful letter to his father after the death of his mother. It is a gracious and wise essay. Real grief, he tells his father, is not healed by time. "If time does anything it deepens grief because real grief is always a product of love." We grieve the loss of our dear ones because we love them and there is, in our very souls, a basic, primal contradiction.

> "Love," Nouwen wrote to his father, "does not know death. Real love says 'forever.' Love will always reach for the eternal. Love comes from that place in us that death cannot enter." [*In Memorium*, p. 37]

The occasion for Nouwen's writing the letter was the first Easter after his mother's death.

> "The best way I can express to you the meaning death receives in the light of the resurrection of Jesus is to say that the love that causes us so much grief and makes us feel so fully the absurdity of death is stronger than death itself. Love is stronger than death." [p. 91-92]

American author Alice Walker wrote a poem:

> "Looking down into my father's
> dead face for the last time
> my mother said without
> tears, without smiles,
> without regrets but with civility
> 'Good Night, Willie Lee,
> I'll see you in the morning' ..."
> [*Daybook*, April, 1996]

Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

> "Love is patient, kind; love bears all things, believes, hopes and endures all things.
> Love never ends."

We come to church on Easter morning maybe because it's what we do every Sunday, or maybe because it's what we think you're supposed to do on Easter, or maybe we come because the music is glorious and the flowers are beautiful. But deep in each of us, I think, we come to church this Sunday to look into the empty tomb and to continue a life-long internal conversation we've been having with ourselves about probabilities and possibilities and biological realities. And I think maybe we each bring along our grief and pain, our dreams that have died, our hopes that have faded. We bring our anxieties and fears; we bring our disappointment that things haven't worked out the way we hoped and expected. We bring our deepest love for those who are dearest to us, and we bring the simple, imponderable mystery of our own lives.

And sometime in the midst of it all we hear love call our name, we feel love lifting us up, causing us to stand taller, holding our head higher. We feel love ignite courage and purpose and determination and resolve. Sometime in the midst of it all we experience love's pull into the future, now knowing that because of what happened this day, nothing will ever separate us, ever, from God's love in Jesus Christ.

So, dear friends, do hear the Easter news as an invitation to live in that love.

Hear the Easter news as an invitation to trust God with the lives and the deaths of your dear ones,

An invitation to trust God with your own future,

An invitation to live without fear and dread and anxiety.

An invitation to live fully, joyfully, courageously, now.

Because Jesus Christ is risen.

Because love is stronger than death.

Because love never ends.

Loving God, we have come again in hope, in faith, to inquire if this could actually have happened. As we seek, call us by name and open our hearts to the love that lived and died and rose again in Jesus Christ: the love that is stronger than death. Amen.